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DOI:

[10.1111/phpr.12384](https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12384)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

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Citation for published version (APA):

Textor, M. (2017). Brentano's Empiricism and the Philosophy of Intentionality. *PHILOSOPHY AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12384>

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Brentano's Empiricism and the Philosophy of Intentionality

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Abstract

Brentano's Thesis that intentionality is the mark of the mental is central to analytic philosophy of mind as well as phenomenology. The contemporary discussion assumes that it is a formulation of an analytic definition of the mental. I argue that this assumption is mistaken. According to Brentano, many philosophical concepts can only be elucidated by perceiving their instances because these concepts are abstracted from perception. The concept of the mental is one of these concepts. We need to understand Brentano's Thesis accordingly: It is a piece of advice on how to become introspectively aware of the distinctive feature of mental phenomena. On this understanding of Brentano's Thesis standard objections to it no longer arise.

1. Introduction

Brentano's Thesis that intentionality is the mark of the mental is central to analytic philosophy of mind as well as phenomenology. The contemporary discussion assumes that it is a formulation of an analytic definition of the mental. I argue that this assumption is mistaken. According to Brentano, many philosophical concepts can only be elucidated by perceiving their instances because these concepts are abstracted from perception. The concept of the mental is one of these concepts. We need to

understand Brentano's Thesis accordingly: It is a piece of advice on how to become introspectively aware of the distinctive feature of mental phenomena. On this understanding of Brentano's Thesis standard objections to it no longer arise.

The paper has two parts. The first, historical part (sections 2-3) introduces central tenets of Brentano's metaphilosophy. In section 2 I discuss Brentano's Concept Originalism and in section 3 I go on to show how this method informs the work of Brentano and his students. The second part (sections 4-7) reconstructs Brentano's Thesis in the light of this metaphilosophy and uses the result to deflect objections to Brentano's Thesis.

2. Brentano's Concept Originalism

Analytic philosophers aim to give analytic definitions, that is, they aim to decompose a given concept into its *marks* or *characteristics*. The marks of a concept are further, distinct concepts such that, necessarily, if an object *x* falls under all of them, *x* falls under the defined concept (and *vice versa*). Brentano concluded his lecture 'On the Concept of Truth' with a methodological sermon that is addressed to philosophers who focus on analytic definitions to the exclusion of other ways to clarify or otherwise illuminate concepts:

We have been concerned with a definition, i.e. with the elucidation of a concept connected with a name. *Many believe such elucidation always requires some general determination, and they forget that the ultimate and most effective means of elucidation must always consist in an appeal to the individual's intuition, from which all our general characteristics [Merkmale] are derived.* What would be the use of trying to elucidate the concepts red or

blue if I could not present one with something red or with something blue? All this has been disregarded by those who were concerned with the nominal definition of truth, whose history we have pursued. If, as I hope, we have succeeded in clarifying this cloudy [getrübte] concept, we have done so only by focusing primarily on examples of true judgements. [...] Even now, after the elimination of confusions and misunderstandings, our definition would convey nothing to one who lacked the necessary intuition. (OCT, 17 [29]; my emphasis; I have changed the translation.)¹

Brentano reminds us that conceptual elucidation cannot *always* consist in defining a concept by decomposing it into its marks. Ultimately analytic definitions will come to an end: there are basic concepts that cannot be defined by decomposing them into marks. Our grasp of the defined concepts is only as good as our grasp of these ‘building blocks’. If we assume that *only* analytic definitions will yield insight in the nature of concepts, we deprive ourselves of an understanding of the indefinable concepts. If conceptual elucidation is to be possible for indefinable concepts as well as for definable ones, a broader approach to conceptual elucidation is needed. What can this approach be?

Brentano’s answer is implicit in his discussion of the concept *good* in his lecture *On the Origin of Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong* (OKRW):

In order to answer these questions [What is the nature of good?] in a satisfactory way we must first and foremost find the origin of the concept of

¹ References to the pagination of the German texts are in square brackets.

good which, like the origin of all our concepts, lies in certain concrete intuitive presentations. (OKRW, 8 [16].)²

Brentano's lectures on ethics elaborate the same topic:³

How are we to go about determining [bestimmen] the concept of the good?
This is the first and the most urgent question, and everything depends upon its being answered. *The task of determining a concept is very closely connected to the question as to the source from which we attain it.* The explanation of a term is in the last analysis a reference to certain phenomena. Thus Hume was quite right when, in his famous investigation into the concept of causality, he introduced the question as to the origin of the concept. (FCA, 84-5 [135]; my emphasis, I have changed the translation of 'bestimmen'.)

Now the maxim 'Find the origin of a concept' needs further explanation. How does one follow it? What is the source or origin of a concept?

Fortunately Brentano's student Stumpf helps us to answer these questions. His 1873 book *Der psychologische Ursprung der Raumvorstellung* (*The Psychological Origin of the Presentation of Space*) was written under the influence of Brentano and contains an explanation of the Brentanian methodology employed:

By [']seeking out the psychological origin of a presentation [Vorstellung][']
we mean the seeking out of the presentations from which it arose, and the

² In part my translation. Chisholm and Schneewind do not translate 'in befriedigender Weise' and 'vor allem'.

³ See also Stumpf 1939, 9.

manner in which it arose. First one will think of the analysis of presentation into simpler and simplest. Then we have to deal with the question whether only real presentations occur in the combination or whether it also contains phantasy presentations. (Stumpf 1873, 4; my translation)

We seek out the origin of a presentation by asking ourselves from *which other presentations* in *which manner* it arose. There are two general kinds of origin of a presentation.

(A) If we find concepts that are marks of the presentation, we have found its origin in other presentations and, at the same time, we have given an analysis of the presentation into its component marks. Answering the question what is the origin of the presentation is in this case analysing it.⁴

(B) If we can't give an analytic definition of a presentation, but find perceptions from which it can be abstracted, we have found the origin of the presentation *without giving an analysis*. One elucidates such a presentation by reversing the process of acquisition: one searches for the perceptions that gave rise to the concept and either episodically imagines having them or recalls them in order to focus one's attention on them.

An important role in (B) is played by the notions of intuition and abstraction. 'Intuition' is in Brentano's terminology just another word for 'perception', the non-inferential acknowledgement of one or some things. Awareness is construed as a form of perception, *inner* perception.⁵

⁴ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pointing out that origin and analysis are in some cases two side of the same coin.

⁵ See PES, 70 [I, 128].

Brentano's views on abstraction change over time, but what remains constant is the claim that abstraction starts from a multitude of things that are simultaneously perceived.⁶ For example, we perceive several spatiotemporal things – particularised colours, shapes, smells – simultaneously. Through contrasts, we notice re-occurring features in the manifold and think of them in isolation. When we can attend to such features in isolation and recall them, we have formed a general concept by abstraction.

In both (A) and (B) we have specified *in which manner* and *from which source* the presentation arose. Hence, inquiring after the origin of a concept is a unified method that applies to definable as well as to indefinable concepts. We must be able to acquire some concepts by abstraction from perceptions in order to prevent a vicious infinite regress or circle. In this sense, possession of any concept requires that one has had perceptions. Brentano found this idea in Aristotle.⁷ He refers his reader to *De Anima* III.8 where Aristotle says 'one who did not perceive anything would neither learn nor understand anything' (432a 8-9, Shields's translation). Shields notes that *De Anima* III.8 has a consistent reading according to which Aristotle is 'a robust empiricist about concept acquisition' (Shields 2015, 346). Whether this form of empiricism is Aristotle's considered view is an open question, but it is not an open question that Brentano interprets Aristotle this way and endorses empiricism about concept acquisition.

3. Concept Originalism in Action

Brentano and his students pursued a philosophical programme that is based on Concept Originalism. It will be helpful to have brief outline of this programme – I

⁶ For the following see LRU, 50 and SNB, 96.

⁷ OKRW, 8 Fn. 18 [16, Fn. 18 on p. 53].

will call it the *Würzburg-Vienna Plan* – as background for the next sections. Brentano mentioned Hume in one of the previous quotes and Hume provides a helpful starting point for our outline. For Hume, a concept – read ‘idea’ – is nothing but a ‘faint copy’ of an impression. If you want to know more about an idea, finding the original helps clarify what the copy is. As Hume put it in his *Inquiries*:

When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion. (Hume 1777, 22)

If you can’t find the source of an idea, there may be none to be found and the words purporting to express it are in fact meaningless and should not be used in posing questions and formulating views.

Humean arguments, such as

(P1) There is no impression of a necessary connection.

Therefore: (C1) We have no idea of a necessary connection.

Therefore: (C2) The term ‘necessary connection’ is a meaningless term that should be replaced by a term that signifies an idea.

have not convinced everyone. The most influential response to Hume’s objection that there is no impression of an external relation from which the concept of a necessary connection is ‘copied’ is Kant’s. He wrote about Hume’s objection:

[...] I tried first whether *Hume*'s objection might not be presented in a general manner, and I soon found that the concept of the connection of cause and effect is far from being the only concept through which the understanding thinks connections of things *a priori*; rather, metaphysics consists wholly of such concepts. I sought to entertain their number, and as I successfully attained this in the way I wished, namely from a single principle, I proceeded to the deduction of these concepts, from which I henceforth became assured that they were not, as *Hume* had feared, derived from experience, but had arisen from the pure understanding. (Kant 1783, 10)

Kant concedes that there is no impression from which the idea of causality could be 'copied'. However, one needs to apply it, argued Kant, in order to distinguish between a succession of experiences and an experience of a (mind-independent) succession of events.⁸ A satisfactory Kantian response to Hume needs to show the indispensability of the contested concepts and find a different source for them.

Something similar goes for our presentations of space and time. They are not concepts, but *a priori* or pure intuitions.⁹ The intuition of space organises the initially non-spatial material, that is, our sensations. We can learn about these forms by teasing out the preconditions of experience of objects, but we cannot perceive space and time. They are not derived from experience, but presupposed in it.

Brentano and his students attempt to show by means of a number of case studies that both Hume and Kant are wrong. They proceed by looking for the origin of a concept that is contested between Hume and Kant and argue *against Hume* that one

⁸ See Kant 1781, A192-3/B237-8.

⁹ See Kant 1781, A24-26/B39.

can derive the concept from perception. There is therefore no need to look for a source of the concept in the faculty of understanding: *Kant is wrong*. A representative example is the concept of causation. In OKRW, Brentano mentions it as an example of

concepts which some modern philosophers, failing to discover their true source, have tried to interpret as being *a priori* categories. (OKRW, 8 Fn. 18 [16, Fn. 18 on p. 53])

Brentano argues that the concept of causation has its source in inner perception, namely our awareness of mental causation:

[...] we note, for example, a causal relation between our belief in a set of premises and our judgements—those judgements which affirm or deny, not merely assertorically, but also apodictically. (ibid.)

The account is more fully developed by Stumpf (1939, 43f). We elucidate the concept of causation by recalling our awareness of drawing a conclusion and attending to what is given in this awareness.

The *Würzburg-Vienna Plan* is to show that concepts that Kant and others classified as *a priori* are in fact indefinable concepts derived by abstraction from perceptions. Though more controversial, the plan takes the concepts of truth and goodness to be derived in this way from perceptions. Brentano conjectured about truth:

No one would be illuminated by an analysis of the concept of the coloured if he had not already abstracted it from the intuition of individual colours.

Perhaps we are faced, in the case of the sense of the term ‘true’, with a fundamental difference between judgments which can only be clarified by means of examples from our inner perception. (FCE, 87 [139])

This conjecture, Brentano argues, turns out to be true. The distinction between true and false judgements is ‘something elementary which one has to experience, just as one needs to have judged to know what judgment is.’ (KAE, 149; my translation).

Now, in *OKRW* Brentano seems to *define* the concepts of good and truth: x is good if, and only if x is correctly loved; x is true if, and only if, x is correctly judged. How is this compatible with his claim that truth is a primitive concept that can only be clarified by perceiving its instances, namely true judgements? The answer is that the ‘definitions’ are not analytic definitions that decompose these concepts into marks. For ‘true’ (‘good’) is used in an extended sense:

We use the expressions “true” and “false” in a number of quite different ways.

Taking them in their strict and proper sense, we speak of true and false *judgements*; then modifying the meanings somewhat we also speak of true and false *things*, we when we speak of “a true friend” or “false gold”. It is hardly necessary to observe that when I spoke in the lecture [OKRW] of *things* being true and false, I was using the terms in their derivative sense and not in their strict and proper sense. (OKRW 48 [59])

The basic concept of truth applies to judgements. It is indefinable, but one can call something true if it stands in a suitable relation to a true judgement. For example, Brentano's explanation of the extended sense of 'true' in OKRW specifies a relation between the primary truth-bearer, judgement, and objects that are called true in the extended sense. These explanations don't decompose the basic concept of truth, but allow us systematise different uses of 'true'.

In OCT Brentano gave what he called a 'definition' of the basic concept of truth: a judgement is true if, and only if, it judges an object correctly [zutreffend]. (OCT, 15-6 [26-7]) Brentano himself says that this 'definition' does not *decompose* the concept of truth into prior marks. For '[t]he expressions "to judge truly" and "to judge appropriately" would seem to be tautologically equivalent' (OCT, 15 [27]). Brentano's 'definition' is not an *analytic* definition, but a 'nominal' definition' and he has a very pragmatic understanding of such definitions. The definiens of a nominal definition is an expression that has the same meaning as the definiendum but is 'in some sense and in some relation more easy to comprehend' than the definiendum (LRU, 85). The value of Brentano's nominal definition for the understanding of truth lies in the fact that 'correctness' does not evoke the misleading idea of correspondence and it is in this respect easier to comprehend. The nominal definition helps breaking the spell the idea of truth as correspondence had over us (OCT, 15 [27]). We will need to bear these points in mind when discussing Brentano's Thesis.

Further representative case studies that argue that contested concepts are abstracted from perception are:

- Stumpf's *Über den psychologischen Ursprung der Raumvorstellung* (1873) (*On the Psychological Origin of the Presentation of Space*) that implements the Würzburg-Vienna plan with respect to space: our notion of space is not an

a priori intuition, but derived from joint perception of extension and qualities like colour. Stumpf's key-move is to argue that we can perceive many things together and thereby make room for perceiving spatial extension together with its filler.

- Husserl's *Philosophy of Arithmetic* (1891) carries out the *Würzburg-Vienna plan* for cardinal number. Husserl starts by alerting his reader to the polysemy of 'number': 'There are various concepts of number.' (Husserl 1891, 1) He goes on to argue that they all depend on the concept of cardinal number; it is the core-concept. This concept is arrived at by abstraction from the perception of some things together. Sometimes we perceive these things/them and such perceptions are the basis for arriving at the concept of a set.

Now we are equipped to approach Brentano's philosophy of intentionality. Brentano's *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* is organised around his famous view of intentionality. How does it fit with the *Würzburg-Vienna Plan*? The clue is in the title. The book investigates psychological concepts from an empirical standpoint and one takes the empirical standpoint if one tries to find the ultimate origin of concepts in perception. In the next sections, I will argue that if we pay attention to Brentano's methodology, we will arrive at a new understanding of Brentano's Thesis. I will first outline the standard reading of the thesis and then develop my own.

4. The Text-Book Account of Brentano's Thesis and Brentano's Problem

Brentano's lasting influence on the philosophy of mind is due to what is now called 'Brentano's Thesis'. The often-quoted and much discussed intentionality quote from *Psychologie* is:

Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call, though not with wholly unambiguous terminology, relation to a content, direction toward an object (which is not to be understood here as a reality), or immanent objectivity. Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself, although they do not all do so in the same way. In presentation something is presented, in judgement something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on.

This intentional in-existence is characteristic exclusively of mental phenomena. No physical phenomenon exhibits anything like it. We can, therefore, define mental phenomena by saying that they are those phenomena which contain an object intentionally within themselves. (PES, 68 [I, 124-5])

In general, philosophers of mind have taken Brentano to provide here non-circular, necessary and sufficient condition for something being a mental act or state. On this reading, Brentano's Thesis is the following statement:

Text-Book Brentano's Thesis: x is a mental event/state if, and only if, x is directed towards an object.

Here are two representative examples of the Text-Book Thesis.

First, Dennett and Haugeland:

Brentano claimed that intentionality is the defining distinction between the mental and the physical; all and only mental phenomena exhibit intentionality.

(Dennett & Haugeland 1987, 481)

On this rendering of Brentano's Thesis, intentionality is necessary and sufficient for being a mental phenomenon.

According to Dennett and Haugeland, Brentano's Thesis also supports Mind/Brain Dualism:

Since intentionality is, he claimed, an irreducible feature of mental phenomena, and since no physical phenomena could exhibit it, mental phenomena could not be a species of physical phenomena. This claim, often called the Brentano Thesis, or Brentano's Irreducibility Thesis, has often been cited to support the view that the mind cannot be the brain, but this is by no means generally accepted today. (ibid.)

The difficult question for physicalists is supposed to be 'How can any physical object such as a brain be a mind, if minds have intentional states, but brains don't?'¹⁰ I will come back to the so-called 'Brentano's problem' in section seven.

¹⁰ The 'classic formulation' is Field 1978, 9. For discussion of this formulation, see Haldane 1989 and Moran 1998. Both, rightly in my view, point out that for Brentano

Secondly, Molnar:

There is a theory, due to Franz Brentano (and scholastic predecessors) according to which intentionality is both necessary and sufficient for the psychological, and, conversely, non-intentionality is necessary and sufficient for the non-psychological. Intentionality provides the demarcation between the psychic and the physical. The theory, known as ‘the Brentano Thesis’, has become widely accepted in contemporary philosophy of mind. (Molnar 2004, 61)

Now, the Text-Book Brentano’s Thesis gives rise to a number of problems that together make it look unpromising.

First, the marks of a concept are other concepts that one can possess and explain independently of the concept one analyses. But the concept [directedness] or [having an object] seems not to fit this bill. On the face of it, the Text-Book Brentano’s Thesis is an explanation of something relatively clear – mental phenomena – in metaphorical terminology that is in need of explanation to be useful. To see this let us consider some explanation of the notion of intentionality. Findlay took the answer to the question ‘What is intentionality?’ to be grounded in our understanding of one of the senses of the preposition ‘of’:

intentionality is not, as Field and others think, the property of *possessing of propositional content*.

A mere sense of grammatical propriety would in fact teach us Brentano's doctrine, would tell us that most of our mental activities must be said to be *of* something. (Findlay 1961, 35)

McIntire and Smith (1989, 147) agree:

Many, perhaps most, of the events that make up our mental life – our perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, hopes, fears, and so on – have this characteristic feature of being “of” or “about” something and so giving us a sense of something in our world.

As Findlay says only ‘most of our mental activities’ must be said to be *of* something. For many mental phenomena it seems strained and unmotivated to say that they are of something: my wondering who will win the Premiership is not *of* something. But let's set this worry aside for the time being.

The basic question is whether one can use our mastery of the preposition ‘of’ to get an initial grip on intentionality. We indeed say ‘I am thinking *of* Rome’ or ‘I am afraid *of* the monster’. Such sentences provide some guidance how to understand ‘of’, but not enough.¹¹ For example, an infection is an infection *of* something – I have an infection of the ear – but is the infection directed towards the infected in the sense under discussion? An eclipse is an eclipse of, for example, the sun. Is it directed towards the sun? McIntire and Smith use scare quotes to avoid that the reader relies on one of the many the sense of ‘of’ in English. But if ‘a mere sense of grammatical propriety’ paired with knowledge of English is insufficient to understand Brentano's Thesis, how is an appeal to ‘of’ helpful?

¹¹ See Siewert 1998, 11-12.

The same goes for Brentano's list of accusative constructions in the last quote from *Psychologie*. To repeat:

In presentation something is presented, in judgement something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on.

It is grammatically correct to continue:

In digestion something is digested, in fermentation something is fermented and so on.

But is digestion intentional? It had better not be. For otherwise, a physical process would come out as a mental activity and the Text-Book Thesis would be falsified.

Again, we are not helped towards an independently intelligible notion of intentionality via our mastery of a linguistic construction. The notion of directedness suggested by Brentano's accusative construction allows for physical processes to be directed. A response to this problem is that only mental events can be of things that don't exist.¹² My thought can be 'of' Pegasus, although there is no such thing as Pegasus, the winged horse. But my infection cannot be of my ear, if there is no such thing as my ear. However, the idea that mental acts can be 'of' something, yet what they are 'of' need not exist, does not further understanding of this notion. Quite the opposite, it makes it more puzzling.

Second, Brentano's Thesis also comes under pressure from philosophers who point out that there are physical objects that are about something. The paradigm

¹² See Ryle 1973, 259.

examples of physical intentionality are objects that have dispositions. If an object has a disposition, it is ‘oriented towards’ the manifestations of the disposition:

a disposition is a state whereby the entity (substance), whose dispositional property it is, is orientated towards the coming about of a possible future state which does not now exist and may never do so, but which, if it does exist and thus becomes determinate, will constitute a manifestation of that disposition.
(Place 1998, 105)

If the magnet is disposed to attract iron, is it directed towards a future event of attracting of a piece of iron that is not yet actual and in fact may never happen?¹³

Third, if we have an intuitive grip on *of-ness* or *being directed towards* at all, obvious counter-examples arise of non-intentional mental states such as moods suggests themselves. Jacques’s depression is a mental state, but what is it about?¹⁴

Fourth, in the second edition Brentano himself made clear that the text-book reading was not the one he intended:

When we said that reference to something as object is that which is most characteristic of mental activity, *this should not be interpreted as though “mental activity” and “relation [Beziehung] to something as object” mean exactly the same thing. Just the opposite is already clearly apparent* from what we have said about every mental activity relating to itself as object, not, however, primarily, but secondarily or, as Aristotle, by whom the fact had

¹³ See Martin & Pfeifer 1998 and Molnar 2004 chapter 3.4ff.

¹⁴ For discussion of this problem for Brentano, see Crane 1998.

already been noticed, puts it, “incidentally” (“nebenbei”). (PES, 214/15 [I, 138]; my emphasis)

Brentano’s remark needs further explanation, but its general message is clear enough: Brentano’s Thesis does not say that the concept of a mental act/state can be analysed as something that has another thing as an object. Quite the opposite.

In the next section, I will argue that all these worries speak against the Text-Book Brentano’s Thesis, but not against Brentano’s Thesis. I will focus on the first and second problems because I take the third to be answered in the literature.

5. Brentano’s Thesis

The three problems just mentioned should make us wary of the Text-Book Brentano’s Thesis. Indeed philosophers find intentionality to be too fraught with problems and look for a replacement.¹⁵ But I think no such replacement is needed if we understand Brentano’s Thesis as it was intended to be understood. For the discussion of Brentano’s metaphilosophy has already primed us to reject the Text-Book Brentano’s Thesis. We have seen in sections 2 and 3 that Brentano is a Concept Empiricist: every concept is acquired either by abstraction from perception or by composing it from so acquired concepts. Concepts are studied by finding their origin. Brentano holds that central philosophical concepts turn out to be one’s that are abstracted from either

¹⁵ See Siewert (1998, 188), who proposes that the notion of correctness is less problematic. See also Crane 2009. The most influential replacement for intentionality is Chisholm 1955. He proposed to cash out intentionality in terms of intentional sentences. I will not discuss such replacements here. In my view, Kenny (1963, 199f) has convincingly shown that Chisholm’s replacement is insufficient.

inner or outer perceptions. Given all the unresolved problems with the Text-book Brentano's Thesis, we should take inspiration from Brentano's treatment of indefinable concepts when discussing Brentano's Thesis. Let's recall what he said about truth:

No one would be illuminated by an analysis of the concept of the coloured if he had not already abstracted it from the intuition of individual colours. Perhaps we are faced, in the case of the sense of the term 'true', with a fundamental difference between judgments which can only be clarified by means of examples from our inner perception. (FCE, 87 [139])

The problems of conceptually articulating the mental makes a related conjecture plausible. Perhaps the concept [mental] is like the concept [coloured] or [true]. One can only acquire the concept [coloured] if something has looked coloured to one. Neither knowledge of a definition nor knowledge of a body of truths can compensate for perceptual awareness of colour. This feature of concept acquisition is also relevant for exercise of the concept. In deciding whether an object is blue or not we need, in the final instance, to look at it in good light and draw on our episodic memory of how blue things look. The same goes for the concept of the mental: it is an indefinable concept that can only be clarified by attending to retained awareness of mental acts.

The assumption that the mental is a concept that cannot be clarified by decomposing it into independently intelligible marks is presupposed, but never articulated in *Psychologie*. In later work, Brentano made it explicit:

The general character of everything mental, as it falls in our experience, is the

having of objects. What is said thereby cannot be made distinct without recourse to experience: just as it would be impossible to make the concept of red clear to a blind man, it is impossible to make the concept of love and hate clear to someone who has never loved and hated, and, the concept of thinking in general and in its most general sense in which it was used by Descartes to someone who has never apprehended himself as a thinker. One could not show such a person what one means when one says no thinking thing without an object of thought, no mental subject without an object. (O, 339; my translation and emphasis.)

Brentano's description of someone who has never apprehended himself as a thinker will strike contemporary readers as similar to Frank Jackson's famous thought experiment.¹⁶ Mary knows every physical fact about colour. But she has lived in a black and white world. When she sees a red object for the first time, she learns something new. Jackson concludes that there are non-physical facts.

Compare now Franz. He knows all the physical facts about mental acts, but he has never paid attention to his own mental life. His attention has been absorbed by studying MRI scans. Now he discovers Brentano's work and starts to train his attention on his own mental activities. When he does so successfully, does he learn something new? Yes, he notices a property that he did not notice before. If he knew all the physical facts about the mind before, he now comes to know something new, namely what is distinctive of the mental.

While Jackson takes his thought experiment to show that there are non-physical facts, Brentano uses his to argue that the mental is a concept that can only be

¹⁶ See his 1982 and 1986.

elucidated by attending to instances of it. The concept of the mental, thinking in its most general sense, can *only* be grasped and clarified by attending to retained awareness of its instances, mental acts and processes. Mastery of it requires the ability to episodically recall and imagine mental acts.

Brentano's methodology in *Psychologie* follows suit. We can only make clear what the mental is by paying attention to mental acts of which we were aware. In line with his other investigations about such concepts as causation Brentano argues

- (i) that the mental is distinguished from the physical by a property that can only be perceived in inner awareness,
- (ii) guiding us to have the right perceptions and directing our attention to the feature we should aware of.

He takes the first step when he asks his readers to consider a list of examples:

Thus, hearing a sound, seeing a coloured object, feeling warmth or cold, as well as similar states of imagination are examples of what I mean by this term. I also mean by it the thinking of a general concept, provided such a thing actually does occur. Furthermore, every judgement, every recollection, every expectation, every inference, every conviction or opinion, every doubt, is a mental phenomenon. Also to be included under this term is every emotion: joy, sorrow, fear, hope, courage, despair, anger, love, hate, desire, act of will, intention, astonishment, admiration, contempt, etc. (PES 60 [I, 111-2])

The examples will jog our episodic memory and guide our imagination. We cannot, argued Brentano, attend to a mental act or process while it is ongoing, but we can recall it in episodic memory and then attend to it.¹⁷ What we find when we attend in this way to our mental activities is that, to use Brentano's gloss, they all have an object. The focus on examples is exactly parallel to Brentano's approach to the primitive concept of truth. Consider again his remark about the concept of truth:

If, as I hope, we have succeeded in clarifying this cloudy concept, we have done so only by focusing primarily on examples of true judgements. [...]
(OCT, 17 [29])

The second step is to direct his readers to focusing their attention on the right properties and relations when they are aware of their mental life. The different formulations of Brentano's Thesis are supposed to do this. Again, Brentano is clear about this in later work:

[We have given a positive determination of the mental] when we said that we have the mental as well as the physical "as an object" [*zum Gegenstande haben*]. This having something as an object is the feature of the mental that we are looking for; it is the common feature of everything mental that falls into our perception. Seeing is having a coloured thing as an object, believing is believing in something [*Glauben an etwas*], loving is loving something. *Just as with any other elementary concept, this concept cannot be clarified other than by appeal to such examples. Nonetheless one had tried to by means of*

¹⁷ See, for example, PES, 99 [I, 181].

giving pictures and comparisons to further the noticing of the distinctive feature. One talked about the indwelling of the seen in the seeing, the object of thought in the thinker. Others thought to speak more clearly when they said that a sort of relation is involved, and called this relation, in contrast to a relation of comparison, the consciousness relation or the intentional relation. Such paraphrases may be helpful to make the apperception of the elementary feature easier, but of course they cannot replace it. (RP, 190-1; my translation and emphasis)

Brentano reviews here his own attempts to characterise intentionality. As attempts to designate a property of mental acts, his characterisations of intentionality as

directedness towards an object

indwelling of an object

non-comparative relation

all fail. In *Psychologie* and other writings, Brentano warned his readers that the expressions he uses are ambiguous or misleading.¹⁸ The property under consideration can only be glossed over or approximated. But, as he says above, they were not meant to designate the property in the first place. They are metaphors that shall make the property salient to us when we attend to mental acts. We are all aware of mental acts, but our attention needs to be guided to have a determinate conception of it. We have to discern it from other properties of the mental that are also given in awareness. An analogy may help to make Brentano's point. The professional wine taster is maybe

¹⁸ See PES, 68 [I, 124] and OKRW, 8 [16].

aware of a distinctive property of the Sylvaner. Not only is he aware of it, he can discern and re-identify it. However, while the wine taster is aware of it, how can he bring it about that you are also aware of it? Merely bringing a bottle of Sylvaner along and letting you taste it will not suffice if the property does not naturally stand out. What he needs to do is to give you advice on how to discern the property when you taste the wine. He will say, ‘Do you get hay in the nose?’ and hope that you are able to attend to a property you are aware of that resembles hay. Brentano proceeds similarly. When he says, for example:

Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself

or

Every mental phenomenon is consciousness of an object

he aims with the help of instructive metaphors to train your attention on a property you are aware of when you recall mental acts.

In *Psychologie* Brentano called Brentano’s Thesis a definition of the mental. It is a definition in the same sense as the definition of truth is a definition. It is a nominal definition whose definiens helps one to apprehend the definiendum, but does not decompose it into independently understandable marks.

Heidegger got the nature of Brentano’s Thesis exactly right when he wrote:

That the comportments-to [*Verhaltungen*]: presenting, judging, thinking, willing, are intentionally structured, is not a sentence that one can put down to memory and know in order to infer a conclusion from it, but it is an instruction

[*Anweisung*] to bring to mind what is meant by it, the structure of the relations, and constantly to reassure oneself of the validity of this statement. (Heidegger 1927, 92; my translation)

In sum: Brentano's Thesis is an instruction to attend to one's mental life guided by suggestive metaphors, not a statement of necessary and sufficient conditions. When you follow Brentano's guidance you will come to know an essential feature of the mental, but the words he uses don't express the concept of this feature, they only guide you in finding it. Brentano's Thesis, if correctly understood, brings about that we come to know what is distinctive of thinking in the most general sense and if we generalise correctly that all and only mental phenomena possess this feature. But in order to do so we must think and pay attention to our thinking, analysing concepts will not help.

With this in mind, we can address two problems that arise for the Text-Book Thesis.

First, does Brentano explain the obscure – the mental – by means of the more obscure – intentionality? No, Brentano's Thesis is not intended as an explanation of the mental in terms of a conceptually prior notion of directedness. No, consider again the end of the previous quote from Brentano about coming to know what is distinctive of thinking in its most general sense:

One could not show such a person [who has not apprehended himself as thinking] what one means when one says no thinking thing without an object of thought, no mental subject without an object. (O, 339)

The notion of intentionality or having an object and therefore Brentano Thesis is not intelligible at all to someone who has not attended to his mental acts. When Brentano says that a mental act is directed, a relation to some content, or ‘of’ something, he gives us pointers that enable us to become acquainted with what we label ‘intentionality’. Talk of ‘of’ etc. is not intended to be independently intelligible and to describe a feature of the mental. It is supposed to guide someone who is aware of his mental life and can attend to mental acts when he recalls them to one feature that they all share. Brentano’s pointers are not explanations of intentionality that are intelligible independently of attending to mental acts.

Second, Brentano’s Thesis does not land us in ontological problems. When I guide your attention to an experienced feature by a metaphor like ‘tastes of liquorice’, I don’t strictly and literally mean that the wine tastes this way. Similarly, while Brentano says in *Psychologie* that mental acts are ‘relations’, he also points out that they are not literally relations. But when we attend to our mental acts, saying that they are ‘relations’ helps us to home in on the right feature. So of course a mental act is not literally a relation to something: only in a liberal or loose sense can we speak of a relation; mental acts are ‘quasi-relational’.¹⁹ Since mental acts are not relations, literally speaking, we don’t need to look for *relata* in the case of hallucinations etc.

6. Acquaintance with Intentionality

Brentano’s Thesis is formulated with the aim to make us aware of and attend to the directedness of our mental activities. In Russell’s terminology, the aim is to get us to be acquainted with intentionality. Why is that an aim worth pursuing?

¹⁹ See PES, 212 [I, 134].

The concepts [having an object] as well as [mental] are primitive concepts. We need perceive the properties they present to grasp them. In order to see this let us consider the concept [blue]. Why are we not satisfied with a description like ‘the colour of the sky’, but go and *look* to the sky to acquire the concept properly? Johnston answers:

Perception represents itself as (or is at least spontaneously taken by its possessors as) a mode of access to the nature of things. When I see the sun setting against the magenta expanse of the sky, I seem to have something about the nature of the sky and sun revealed to me. (Johnston 1993, 257)

And, he continues, we take pleasure in and value knowledge of the nature of things. Such knowledge can for some things only be found in (non-epistemic) perception. The nature of blue is revealed to me when something looks blue to me and I pay attention to the colour it displays by comparing and contrasting it. The knowledge we covet cannot be acquired by coming to know propositions regarding the colours.

Outer perception represents itself as mode of access to sensible properties; inner perception or awareness, if combined with episodic recall, represents itself as a mode of access to the nature of the mental. We come to know the nature of mental acts by being aware of them and training our attention to them. Guided by Brentano’s advice, we will come to know an essential feature of mental acts and this feature itself.

It is a further step from knowledge of an essential feature of the mental to Brentano’s Thesis that *all* and only mental acts are intentional. Brentano takes care of the ‘all’ by induction:

Induction plays, as it does in other empirical sciences, the main role in descriptive psychology, for instance, that every mental phenomenon is directed to an object. (GÄ, 37; my translation)

How can we convince ourselves that only mental acts are intentional? If the nature of intentionality is fully revealed in awareness, any property or relation whose nature is not revealed in this way is not intentionality.

We are now in a position to answer the objection that the existence of physical intentionality shows Brentano's Thesis to be wrong. The concept [having an object] is supposed to be a concept that one can only acquire and master if one has been aware of mental acts and events that fall under it. In contrast, Place's concept [oriented towards] can be acquired by observing dispositions under different conditions. If Lewis is right, it can even be analysed in terms of counterfactuals.²⁰ Hence, intentionality is one form in which one thing can be related to another, [oriented towards] a different one. Therefore Brentano's claim that only mental acts and states exhibit intentionality is not falsified by the suggestive description of objects 'being oriented towards' the manifestations of their dispositions. In general, sometimes the essence of one thing involves another. It is essential for a boundary to bound an object; it is essential for a disposition to dispose an object to certain manifestations; that is, it is part of our understanding of what it is for an object to have a disposition to be disposed to such manifestations. But it is not only essential that mental acts 'have an object'; we can only have non-propositional knowledge of what the so-glossed essential property is by instantiating it in mental acts and being conscious of

²⁰ See Lewis 1997.

it. This is different for the orientation of dispositions and hence we should keep intentionality and orientation apart.

7. Brentano's Problem Revisited

Did Brentano pose a challenge for physicalists by providing a mark of mental phenomena? It seems so. For he wrote:

This intentional in-existence is characteristic exclusively of mental phenomena. No physical phenomenon exhibits anything like it. We can, therefore, define mental phenomena by saying that they are those phenomena which contain an object intentionally within themselves. (PES, 68 [I, 124-5])

However, Brentano's Thesis speaks neither in favour of nor against physicalism.

Again, one can explain this by exploiting the analogy between our concepts of colours and the concept of intentionality.

I see a red object in good light and it looks red to me. In this situation I know the nature of the colour, a disposition whose nature is revealed to me in perception. This knowledge is compatible with ignorance of the contingent facts which make the object possess redness:

Of course one does not thereby know the facts concerning how in general the disposition is specifically secured or realized. But these are facts concerning the disposition's contingent relations to other properties. They do not concern the intrinsic and essential nature of the disposition. (Johnston 1993, 257-8)

The same colour may and often is in fact realised by different physical facts, for example, different surface properties. So one can know what the colour is, know its essence, without knowing all contingent facts about the colour.

We find something similar for the mental. When I am aware of a mental act and pay attention to it, I acquire non-propositional knowledge of what ‘having an object’ is and what the nature of mental acts consists in. This knowledge cannot be undermined or improved by coming to know propositions about intentionality and the mental. But my non-propositional knowledge is of course incomplete. For example, whether being directed on something depends on or consists in physical facts – and if so, which – I don’t know.

How could Brentano assume otherwise? In fact, he does not. The last quotation makes clear that he holds that physical phenomena are not intentional. Now, physical *phenomena* are not physical states or events:

Examples of physical phenomena [...] are a colour, a figure, a landscape which I see, a chord which I hear, warmth, cold, odor which I sense; as well as similar images which appear in the imagination. (PES, 61 [I, 112])

Physical phenomena are the objects of outer perception. We know a chord, a colour or an odour ‘perfectly and completely’ when we perceive them.²¹ When we know them in this way, we are not aware of anything that merits the label ‘directedness’. It is not part of the nature of physical phenomena to be directed onto something; it is part of the nature of mental phenomena to have this directedness.

²¹ See Russell 1912, 25.

The distinction between mental and physical *phenomena* leaves open whether mental phenomena are exercises of physical powers or realised in physical mechanisms or physical phenomena are exercises of mental powers. It does not pronounce on the contingent properties of mental and physical phenomena.

Brentano argued, in fact, against materialism.²² But he is also perfectly clear that one cannot argue for materialism only on the basis of our awareness of the mental. Our awareness of mental phenomena is evident, but incomplete. For example, it is often proposed that only physical things are in space. Brentano is wary of this mark of the mental. For:

It is compatible with the evidence of [awareness] that our mental activities possess spatial determination, but these don't appear to us. (RP, 223; my translation)

Awareness reveals to us the nature of mental phenomena, but it does not reveal to us all properties of mental phenomena; awareness is, for instance, silent about spatial determinations judgements etc. So how could a distinction of mental and physical phenomena that is grounded in our awareness speak in favour of or against materialism (see *ibid.*)? Brentano's arguments against materialism make therefore no use of observations about intentionality.

8. Conclusion

The contemporary discussion of Brentano's Thesis assumed that

²² See RP, 228ff.

- (i) Brentano's Thesis is the statement of an analytic definition that provides a mark of the concept of the mental;
- (ii) the concept of intentionality can be mastered independently of the concept of the mental;
- (iii) the mental comprises mental states and acts.

However, Brentano rejected (i) to (iii). Brentano's Thesis is a guideline to discover one feature of mental acts when one attends to them in episodic memory. The concept of the mental can only be elucidated if one is able to have mental acts and attend to them. Brentano's Thesis is an advice directed to a thinker to attend in the right way to his mental life to become acquainted with the essential, but conceptually primitive feature of the mental. If it is carried out successfully, we come to know a feature that all and only mental phenomena essentially have. 'Intentionality' is a label for this primitive, but introspectible feature of mental acts. If we want to assess Brentano's Thesis, we need to engage with this conception and not the Text-Book Thesis. I will leave this assessment to another occasion.²³ But it should be clear from what has been said so far that we need to approach Brentano's Thesis in a different way from the Text-Book Thesis.²⁴

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²³ See Textor (Forthcoming), chapter 3.

²⁴ I am grateful to Keith Hossack for many discussions about intentionality and Jessica Leech for comments on a previous draft. Special thanks for very helpful and detailed comments go to an anonymous referee.

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